

When you kiss me, I want to die by honeyvenom

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Codependency, Dark Richie Tozier, Dirty Talk, Dom/sub Undertones, Dubious Consent, Internalized Homophobia, Jealous Richie Tozier, M/M, Murder, Obsessive Behavior, Period-Typical Homophobia, References to Depression, Repression, Unhealthy Relationships

Language: English

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-11-06

Updated: 2019-12-08

Packaged: 2019-12-16 18:35:29

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 2

Words: 18,216

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

"I must have imagined how much you fucking wanted me. How you'd been panting for me all year."

It's his first night back in Derry and memories of Richie have been haunting Eddie all evening. But Eddie doesn't realise just how much Richie once meant to him until Richie drunkenly confronts him back at the Town House.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Please note that this fic features graphic consensual sex between two 17-year-old boys. Obviously if that makes you uncomfortable, please don't read any further.

Eddie couldn't sleep. He'd been trying to valiantly for the last couple of hours, but the Town House ached with memory. Every corner of Derry did. And despite the bone-deep exhaustion he felt from driving all day to get here, sleep wasn't going to come anytime soon. Not after the overwhelming reunion at dinner, and not with the memories blooming behind his eyes.

They've been coming to him in small bursts all evening. There was the first time he met Bill when he was five, when the older boy had comforted him over his grazed knee. A teacher who had given him a kiwi-green lollipop for getting full marks in a test. The bike he'd ridden to school every day until it got mangled by Bowers and his crew. How he'd mourned it afterwards like a friend or a beloved pet.

And Richie, all the memories of Richie. He's surprised he could forget anyone that annoying. Stupid, brash, bug-eyed kid who could never leave Eddie alone, no matter how much he snapped or pushed the other boy away. Those memories have been coming in thick and fast since their altercation at dinner. The constant nicknames, his big teeth, the way he'd tickle the delicate skin behind Eddie's knees. And always ruining every afternoon the Losers spent together with those awful, crude jokes.

Eddie huffs into his pillow. That's it, there's definitely no hope for sleeping now.

He wanders the hallways outside his room, but the dead of night sinks everything into silence. The others must have fallen asleep at last. He doesn't know how. Regaining your memories feels like regrowing a skeleton you never knew you lost.

He heads downstairs as if pulled by an invisible string. Ever since Mike called earlier that day, a strange compulsion has driven everything he's done. *Go back to Derry. Meet the others. See Richie again – wait, what?* That had never been on his mind. And why would it be? How could he ever be excited about seeing a man who looked like he'd just fallen out of a dumpster and who smelled like cigarettes and puke?

Stupid fucking Richie Tozier. Eddie had never found him funny. Over the years he'd watched every single YouTube video, interview and appearance on SNL to prove it to himself. And he was right. He had never laughed. Turns out the guy had never even written his own material anyway. What a fraud. Phoney. They'd probably only been friends as children because Bill had brought them together. No way would he ever have tolerated his stupid face and vulgar mouth otherwise.

He rounds the corner and almost jumps out of his skin when he sees Richie standing there. Tries to ignore the sudden clenching in his stomach; the way his skin starts to thrum. Just like he tried to ignore the weird rush of emotions when he first saw him in the Jade of the Orient. The ones that brought him to the verge of a panic attack, only disguised by excusing himself to the bathroom where he slumped against the stall door and trembled violently for a full 10 minutes. Because there had been something about seeing that face, something about his forehead and eyes and teeth that sparked something in Eddie he couldn't understand.

Richie's still drinking. His eyes are unfocused as he leans against the bar, staring into the bottom of the glass hazily. Eddie turns to go back to his room, doesn't think he can face Richie without the protective buffer of the group, but the other man catches him in his periphery before he can scurry back up the stairs.

"Well if it isn't Princess Edwina himself," Richie taunts, his face splitting into one of his crooked grins. "Defying his beauty sleep."

Eddie wants to bite back, but doesn't. Even from the doorway Eddie can smell the booze coming off him. If he thought Richie looked bad earlier this evening, he looks even worse now. His curls wild, eyes rimmed in red. The dark stubble on his cheeks and throat has grown

even more over the last few hours. It looks like it could rub Eddie raw if Richie dragged his face across his skin.

Eddie swallows, not sure where that last thought came from.

“You're not sleeping either.”

“Yeah, well, I've never been a great sleeper. Always write at night. When I do write, I mean.”

Richie's eyes suddenly focus and snag on Eddie, dragging slowly from his face all the way to his feet and back. Eddie flushes when he remembers the soft t-shirt and shorts he'd thrown on to sleep in. He hadn't thought about it when Bill had stopped by his room to talk to him earlier. Bill, with his kind eyes and weary smile, saying *it's really good to see you, Eddie*. Now he can't help but cross his arms self-consciously. Tries not to think about how much thigh is on display.

“You and your fucking shorts, man,” Richie smiles as he brings the glass back to his mouth. Whatever the fuck that means.

It's a fond smile, though, and Eddie thinks he can be cordial for the sake of the others. Even if everything about Richie rubs him up the wrong way.

“I'm exhausted but I just can't sleep. Being back in Derry...” he rubs a hand across the back of his neck. “It's strange.”

“Like stepping back in time, right? All the same shitty places, same shitty people.”

Eddie smiles tentatively. He doesn't know what to say, which is a first. When they were kids they could never shut up. They had always been yelling, squabbling, hooting, pulling at each other, their legs tangled up in the hammock or in a picnic blanket. Memories suddenly pour back into all the dark pockets of Eddie's memory: the boys shrieking as they jumped into the lake together; Eddie's small forehead creased with laughter as Richie whispered jokes in his ear; Richie gathering Eddie into his arms as the other boy cried snottily into his t-shirt after breaking his arm.

Rich's voice cuts through the new flood of memories. A knife through

gossamer.

“Remembering’s a weird thing. Kinda itches, filling in those dead spots.”

He looks at Eddie, and it’s a shrewd, assessing gaze. All the humour has dropped from his face, leaving something that makes Eddie antsy.

“Have you been remembering?”

“In bits and pieces, yeah. Just got some now.”

“What do you remember?”

“So much. The way we cycled around Derry every weekend, the quarry, when Stan’s mom would make challah on Saturday mornings and-”

“No,” Richie cuts in impatiently. “I mean, what do you remember about us?” He waves vaguely between them. “You and me?”

“Oh.” Where does he even begin? Where to unpick the tapestry that is Richie Tozier weaving into his memory, replacing everything he thought he knew?

“I remember you driving me crazy,” he says, going for light. “You were a real asshole.”

And not just that, the memories tease. Where at dinner it was all snapshots of Richie teasing him mercilessly, prodding him at every opportunity and calling him those dumb fucking nicknames, now there are more unfurling at the back of his head. The way they held hands when the others weren’t around, a light, shy tangling of their fingers; how Eddie would always share his ice cream with Richie and never any of the others; the adoring look he would give Richie when he’d said something particularly smart or witty. Because even though he acted stupid, Richie wasn’t. He was actually the smartest, sweetest person Eddie knew, and there was no one else Eddie would rather spend time with.

“Do you need to sit down?” Richie asks suddenly, gesturing to a chair.

Eddie realises how hard he's breathing, how his heart is racing like he's just run a marathon. Because how could he have forgotten this much?

Richie comes closer, his hands stuck out awkwardly as if Eddie's about to swoon like some delicate storybook damsel, but he waves him off.

"No, it's fine. I just... Sorry, everything is just so intense."

"Tell me about it. Shit's off the charts crazy."

"I remember how hard you used to laugh," Eddie says, leaning against the door into the bar, heart still thumping. "You'd do this thing where you'd laugh and cola would come shooting out of your nose. It was the grossest thing."

"Endearing, I would say."

"Oh, sure, we can go with that." He smiles at Richie, and it's the first genuine smile he's given the other man all evening. It feels nice. Especially when Richie smiles back. Not the wide, manic grin that he uses to punctuate a joke, but something much softer, curling at the corners of his lips.

It's a smile that fills his stomach with butterflies.

"I remember every single thing you carried in your fanny pack. Band-aids, gauze, antiseptic cream, fucking safety pins and sticky tape. Surprised you didn't go into medicine when you left Derry, you were the best at patching all of us up."

And Eddie doesn't know why either. Maybe because he could never remember being a kid. How good it felt to look after Bill and the others. As if through using his hands to mend their bruises and scrapes, he said thank you, *thank you for putting up with me and always being my friend.*

"I remember when you got that beat-up, old pick-up truck when we turned 16. You were besotted with it. Drove us everywhere."

Richie shakes his head, grinning.

“Ah fuck yeah, I’d forgotten about that. Sweet ride. Don’t know what ever happened to her. Probably wound up at the dump when I skipped town.”

Eddie feels a twinge of melancholy rush through him. Because Richie had, hadn’t he? Skipped town. Had driven away and never looked back. And why hadn’t Eddie been with him? He can’t remember.

“I remember how I’d knock on your window and come see you at night,” Richie says quietly. “I’d cycle all the way over to your house, through all kinds of fucking abominable weather, just so I could climb up to your room and hang with you.”

And as if his words had lit a match, Eddie remembers that too. His head swims with images of Richie climbing through his bedroom window to see him. They had been secret meetings, completely hidden from his mom, and an open invite that Eddie never extended to the rest of the Losers.

He sees a montage of Richie pushing his way into his bedroom, from a small boy with huge glasses and skinned knees to a gangly teen with broad shoulders and a crop of dark curls. Sees himself waiting by the window, grinning as Richie finally rounds the corner to their street and climbs up to see him. It had been an unspoken ritual, as powerful as the scar cut into his palm.

He breaks back out of the memories as Richie huffs with laughter.

“Do you remember that night light you had? The one with woodland animals in a house? You still had that when we were like fifteen.”

Eddie straightens and points an accusing finger at him.

“Fuck you, Tozier. My mom got me that. It was fucking cute.”

They both laugh at the same time. And something tightens in Eddie’s chest. *It used to be like this all the time*, that little voice at the back of his head whispers. *He made you laugh like no one else ever has.*

“It was cute,” Richie says, eyes serious again. “You were cute.”

The admission makes Eddie’s throat catch. A memory of *god you’re so*

fucking cute, Eds at the corner of his vision before skittering away.

He realises that he's still staring at Richie, that the other man is looking back just as intensely. And holy christ, hurling insults at dinner had been so much easier than this. Whatever was crackling between them now.

He swallows and pushes up from where he's slouched in the doorway. Where he's been chatting with famous comedian Richie Tozier while he wears tiny cotton shorts like it's nothing in the world. The absurdity of the scene winds him, and he suddenly wants nothing more than to be alone.

"I guess I should head up, early start tomorrow and all that. Don't we have a demonic clown to catch? It probably doesn't work unless you've had six hours of sleep or something."

He waves a hand at Richie as he turns to go back to his room, when Richie calls after him.

"I remember popping your cherry when we were seventeen."

It comes out of nowhere, slams into Eddie like a punch to the face. He looks back at Richie, hears himself suck in a breath, but the other man is still leaning back against the bar like the most nonchalant motherfucker in the world.

"What?"

"Yeah, in your bedroom one day when your mom was out buying groceries."

"That's not funny," he gets out somehow, his throat like parchment.

"For once it's not a joke."

"You're a liar then."

"I'm not. I can see it in my head. You can't?"

"No," Eddie replies tightly. "You must be thinking of someone else."

Richie laughs ruefully, his eyes dragging over Eddie again like he can see straight through his clothes. To the places where his skin draws tight at the thought of Richie ever seeing him naked, or touching him where no one else ever has. Not Myra, no one.

“No, it’s definitely you. No way would I ever confuse that tight little body of yours with someone else.”

“Fuck off, Richie.”

And he feels anger start to bleed into some of the shock. Because Richie making shit up about him and how he looks makes him feel dirty. He had been slender and small as a boy, something that made him a prime target for every shithead bully in Derry, and he had hated it. Hated his small shoulders, his arms like slivers. The bird bones of his ankles. And no way would he have ever let Richie fucking Tozier take advantage of that.

“But it’s weird, all these memories,” Richie continues, ignoring how still Eddie is, how he’s about to blow any moment and sock Richie in the mouth. “It’s like they’re suddenly fresh, like they just happened. You had freckles on your nose all summer, I can see them when I close my eyes.”

His eyes drift over Eddie’s shoulder, like he’s remembering something particularly sweet.

“Can feel the way you clenched around my dick. Your soft little mouth when I kissed it. You used to love it when I parted your lips with my thumb.”

And Eddie can’t take it anymore.

“I said shut the fuck up,” he says, fists clenching at his sides.

Richie refocuses on Eddie, and cracks into a toothy smile. Not the soft one from a few minutes before, but something much crueller.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get to it. It hit me in the middle of dinner when we were talking about your allergy to cashews. Suddenly knew how that mouth felt like around my dick, when you were getting me ready to fuck your little ass.”

“In case you haven’t realised, I’m not gay, dipshit. Happily married.” He points to the ring on his finger.

“Oh yeah? Want me to tell you more? How you invited me over that afternoon, saying that we could be alone. I waited for two hours for your mom to get lost and when she finally did, I was up in your room like a shot. You were waiting for me, sitting on your bed in just your shorts and socks. Thought I’d literally died, you looked so beautiful. You’d even changed the bed sheets.”

Eddie can feel his face go beet-red. He doesn’t know if it’s from the innocent little seduction scene Richie’s laying out, or from the other man calling him beautiful, but he doesn’t want to know. Doesn’t. Because no way would he ever do that. Richie was gross and dirty and always had been. Was he supposed to suddenly believe that Eddie had wanted him? Had fucking seduced him?

“It’s just some fucked-up gay fantasy of yours,” he spits. And suddenly regrets it. Because something changes in Richie’s face then. His eyes go dark, and when he starts talking again, his voice seethes.

“Oh that must be it, my mistake. I must have imagined how much you fucking wanted me. How you’d been panting for me all year. Wearing those tiny fucking shorts every single time we hung out. Getting your legs over me. Curling up to me as we watched movies. The way you said,” and Richie’s voice shifts into a breathy falsetto, *’oh Richie I just like you so much* when I drove us to the quarry after school. Putting my hands on your waist when the others weren’t around. Going up on tiptoes to kiss me.”

“We were best friends,” Eddie cries out, so frustrated he could tear his hair out. “All that stuff with the clown did it. We were closer than other kids after that.”

“No, not like you and me.”

And he does remember. The shy smiles. Cuddling beneath the stars. But they were just boyhood friends, and Richie made him feel safe. It was completely innocent. It was never... like that. Not until...

I really, erm, like you, Richie. First the small, tentative kisses, Eddie

covered in an eternal dusky blush whenever Richie was around. And then the hotter, wetter kisses, Richie pushing Eddie up against a bathroom wall or making out in the back of his car. He'd spent the summer looking at Richie's dark eyes and cheekbones and the way his shoulders were broadening out. And when kissing wasn't enough, Richie had rucked up his t-shirt to mouth at his nipples, sucking each one like a cherry as Eddie's breath whistled through his clenched teeth. Then later at night, when Richie had left him breathless, kiss-swollen and wet, Eddie would push his face into his pillow and wonder what Richie would feel like inside-

"You're such an asshole," he hisses, edging back into the hallway. "Just stay the fuck away from me. We know what we need to do here, but I don't want you to say one more word to me."

"Hey, don't you fucking turn your back on me!"

Eddie speeds up, tries to get to the stairs, but in no time at all, Richie has a large hand curled around his wrist, yanking him back into the room. And as soon as he feels those fingers around him, he sees it.

It's sticky, syrupy summertime in Derry and he's losing his virginity to Richie Tozier in his bedroom. They're lying sideways on Eddie's bed, with Richie behind him, one hand pulling his hair back, the other gripping the meat of his thigh. And Eddie's crying a little - it hurts, it's his first time - but it's so good too. So much better than he ever thought it could be. There's a special spot inside him that makes him see stars. And even though Richie is eager and clumsy and only hitting it half the time, it still makes Eddie whine every time he grazes against it.

They're so young it hurts. They really shouldn't be doing this at all, adult Eddie thinks as he watches the scene unfold. But it's been boiling up to this since they were kids. And Eddie's wanted it for months. Even though he shouldn't. Even though it should be gross and dirty, and Richie's not even wearing a rubber. But he never knew it would feel like this. Like Richie had found the deepest place inside him and made it his own.

Against his ear, Richie's mouth is babbling "god, baby, you feel so fucking good," while all Eddie can do is keen, his mouth wide open.

It's not long before Richie is grasping his chin, pulling his face around to slot their mouths together. Richie can never handle it when any part of Eddie is away from him. Even when he's inside him, there's still a part of Eddie he needs to be touching. And Eddie feels like he's going cross-eyed. Because even though Richie is a skinny, lanky thing, somehow he fucks like a man. Just the thought makes Eddie shudder against him, makes him push back into the bruises that Richie's making on his thin hips, whining wetly against his mouth.

"Say it," he hears Richie groan, piercing through the fog.

"Richie ngh," is all he can gasp. Can't concentrate on anything but being filled with Richie's dick. How have they never done this before when it feels so good?

"Say it, or I'm pulling out."

"No!"

And Eddie is a little mortified at how desperate his younger self sounds, how his voice cracks like he's about to cry, but the thought of being empty makes him go crazy. Makes him reach behind and pull Richie's hips against him.

"Then say it."

"I love you," he cries out, and Richie makes a throaty, guttural noise.

"Again, baby, please."

"I love you, I love you, I love you," he babbles as Richie jackhammers that sweet spot with the head of his dick.

"I love you," and he means it, oh god, he really means it. Because skin and guts and heart and bones, everything that he has belongs to Richie. He's Richie's boy. And he always will be because they're going to run away together when they turn 18 and they're never going to look back. They're going to get in Richie's truck and drive until Derry's just a pinprick on the horizon. And he's crying Richie's name as he cums, Richie's tongue in his ear as he whispers he'll *never let you go, baby I'll never fucking let you go-*

And Eddie's back in the inn, pulling away from Richie so quickly he almost falls flat on his ass in the hallway.

Richie watches him, breath heavy, eyes all pupil in the dim light.

"You get it now?"

But Eddie can't speak. Because it feels like it's just happened. Like Richie has just finished fucking him. Like his body has just been pulled into various positions, his thighs straining, his forearms tight.

"Fuck," Richie breathes. "No wonder nothing else ever compared."

Richie pulls him back, his long, strong arms caging Eddie against him like he did when they were kids. Like Eddie was a doll to be handled.

"I used to have these one-night stands. I'd go out and meet guys and fuck them. Sometimes I'd take them back to my place, sometimes I couldn't wait and I'd just do it in the bathroom of whatever bar we were in. Get them up against the door and fuck them any way I wanted. But it never satisfied me. Now I know why. It was never enough. Not after I'd had you. My gorgeous little hometown shortcake."

Richie laughs again, voice raspy, and Eddie feels his hot breath brush his cheek. The ghost of the wet, hot kiss Richie once bathed him in.

"I saw you tonight and I thought, 'well this is why I've only ever gone after mouthy, dark-haired twinkies'. You fucking ruined me for life."

Eddie can't talk. His heart is pounding. He feels his hole clench, wants so much to be filled with Richie's cock again. He wants it so bad he starts to quiver in Richie's arms. He hardens in his shorts, as he wonders, stupidly, how big Richie is all these years later. Flushes hot as he thinks about how he'd begged for it. Fierce, proud, little Eddie Kaspbrak, begging for bug-eyed Richie Tozier's dick like he'd die if it wasn't inside him.

And somehow Richie seems to know all this, eyes slowly grazing from Eddie's face all the way down his chest. His face turns sly.

"Did you ever think about me?" he whispers. "When you were trying

to give it to your wife?"

"Just shut up, Richie," Eddie moans again, but it lacks all the heat from before. Because all he can think of is the thick length of Richie's dick hammering into him. His mouth breathing into his ear, *yeah gorgeous clench down on me just like that.*

"Did you think about how much better it would be if you had some guy's big dick inside you instead? Maybe a guy who was taller, bigger? Did you ever fantasise about a guy who looked just like me?"

He's so close now that he could kiss Eddie if he wanted to. And Richie still stinks. Like booze. Like cigarettes. Like the cheap Chinese food they'd eaten and sour sweat from being on the road all day. But he feels warm, and Richie's fingers digging into his arm grounds him.

And Eddie doesn't want to say it out loud, but he had thought about Richie. Over the last few years, something had driven him to watch Richie's stand-up online, even though he hated them. He'd watch Richie for hours, until his stomach curled hotly and he slammed his laptop shut. He'd take a long shower. Or go for a run. Anything but let that asshole get under his skin. Until the next night when he was Googling him again, opening a tab for his Twitter, chewing hard on his bottom lip as he looked through the pictures on his Instagram.

But Eddie can't retaliate, can't find the strength to hurt Richie back. Because cutting through all the desire like the sharpest knife, is the knowledge of how much he had fucking loved Richie. Had loved him since they were children. Loved him so much he felt like he couldn't breathe when he wasn't with him. Knowing that from the afternoon they cut their palms and held them together in a daisy chain of doomed childhood, maybe even long before, that he would love this boy for the rest of his life.

It's a realisation that brings tears to his eyes.

He lifts his gaze and looks at Richie. Sees every detail up close for the first time in 27 years.

"I hate you," he whispers.

“Oh, baby,” Richie says, and he sounds almost apologetic. “That’s not what you said while I was coming inside you.”

Eddie jerks away, somehow finds the courage to run from Richie and up the stairs. And this blessed time, Richie doesn’t come after him. Eddie gets to his room after what feels like an eternity, slamming the door shut as soon as he’s inside. He wheezes, feels another panic attack threaten his vision, a migraine blooming sharply from the onslaught of memories. And for the first time in years, Eddie lets himself cry. For his friends. For his splintered childhood. For the boy who fell in love with his best friend, and whose heart was undoubtedly broken when Richie left him behind.

Sleep does find Eddie in the end, long after the tears have dried on his cheeks. As his eyes drift shut, he whispers a single *Richie* into his pillow, not knowing how the other man stands outside his bedroom door, keeping vigil against the night.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

So just after a month, here I am with another chapter of this weird, dark little love story. The first chapter was written as a one-shot, but everyone's enthusiasm and numerous requests for more inspired me to keep writing. I hope you enjoy it just as much as the first part. There will also be a third and final part coming soon!

If you're not sure whether this story is for you, please heed the tags. I've also included non-spoilery end notes about the nature of Richie and Eddie's relationship if you'd like to know more before you dive in.

The next morning comes far too quickly, slashing its way through Eddie's window just when he feels like he's drifted into a deeper sleep. Maybe it's for the best. His dreams are a wet watercolour of new memories, with colours and images all dripping into each other until all he can see is a mess.

He stumbles into the bathroom so tired and sore he feels hungover, though the last time he got drunk was as a teenager, when Richie plied him with strawberry wine at a sleepover with the Losers. Eddie drank it straight from the bottle while Richie shared a joint with Bill and Beverly, curling a hand around Eddie's calf as the three of them got deliciously high. The night ended with Richie feeling Eddie up under a blanket as the others slept, licking his neck and whispering "baby baby baby" into his ear as Eddie tried not to wake everyone up with his moaning.

Eddie brushes his teeth, showers, moisturises and gets dressed all in that precise order. He definitely doesn't think about Richie. Not his face or his smile, or any of the things he said last night.

Oh, baby, that's not what you said when I was coming inside you.

Eddie shivers and zips up his suitcase with a quick, aggressive tug of his wrist. Wishes he could box away these new memories just as efficiently.

The others are grouped around the breakfast table when he walks downstairs, drinking dark, bitter coffee and picking at a limp selection of pastries. They all smile tiredly when they see him. Everyone apart from Richie, though his eyes track him the moment he rounds the corner.

“Shortcake,” he greets quietly, as he taps a cigarette on the table.

Eddie doesn’t respond, too busy trying to ignore the way his heart picks up at the nickname, nerves sluicing beneath his skin like ants.

“Hey man,” Bill says, clapping a hand on his shoulder as he sits down.

Eddie flinches, readies himself for a violent jerk of new memories, but Bill’s touch is like slipping into a stream. All he feels is Bill’s warm, familiar presence. The boy who had held Eddie’s hand on the first day of school and the first friend to ever invite Eddie over after class. He remembers the way he’d begged his mother to let him go, knew it was his first chance to make a real friend. But there hadn’t been any trouble. His mom knew Bill was a nice boy, that he came from a respectable family. He wasn’t some dirty, no-good troublemaker like Richard Tozier-

Some things never change, he thinks, as he risks a glance at Richie, who’s staring at the companionable weight of Bill’s hand on Eddie’s shoulder.

He looks even worse than Eddie feels, though he’s obviously showered. His dark hair curls damply at the nape of his neck, and Eddie notices he still hasn’t shaved. Eddie doesn’t look at it, can’t. Obviously because the sight of it annoys him - not because it makes him think about how dark the hair would be on Richie’s chest or how it would trail down his lower stomach beneath his jeans.

Eddie bites down on his bottom lip hard, the snick of pain grounding him. Looks away before Richie can catch his eye.

Beverly notices his strained expression and reaches out to brush her hand against his. "Hey honey, you sleep okay?"

Again, nothing bad happens, just a low-key hum of sense memory that fills him with a wave of *sisterbeverlycomfortwarmth*. How they had met at the quarry that summer afternoon to talk about their parents, how she had placed a palm on his face and kissed his brow as he talked about how his mom wanted him to be sick; how Beverly admitted, voice catching as she cried, how her father touched her.

"I tried my best," he says with a weak smile. "The beds aren't exactly the nicest. Thought I was going to sprain my back just lying on the mattress."

"That's what you get for Derry's finest," Mike says grinning. "Come to the Derry Town House where you'll find lumps and bumps in every corner."

"Some great fucking tour guide you are. Remind me not to tip you on the way out," Richie mutters, as Mike grins and thwacks him on the shoulder.

"You should eat something before we go, Eddie," Bev says, squeezing his hand before her eyes roam sideways to Ben, who smiles at her across the table. Something passes between the two of them, something much softer than the tension Richie is bleeding in a steady stream of red.

"Is there any fruit?" Eddie asks, looking dubious at the less than palatable selection of watery eggs and stale croissants spread across the table.

His eyes shoot up as he hears Richie huff with laughter.

"All hail Kaspbrak, who hereby decrees that butter is thy nation's true enemy," he proclaims in a pitch-perfect regal British accent.

Eddie clenches his teeth, rises to the bait as he always does.

"Have you ever heard of hydrogenated fats, asshole?"

A whisper of a memory slams into him. 13-year-old Eddie standing at

the mouth of the sewers and asking Richie, “Have you ever heard of a staph infection?”, his dark eyes ablaze and forehead clenched in annoyance just before Bill finds the lone galosh floating through the water.

He blinks the image out of his eyes to see Richie smiling at him. He’s obviously thought of the same memory.

“I wonder if Betty Ripsom was ever reunited with her lost shoe.”

“You’re an idiot,” Eddie replies, rolling his eyes.

Richie smirks; a shadow of the taunting look he gave Eddie last night.

“I’m sorry the breakfast selection isn’t up to your standard, princess. The owners should be ashamed. What would you like? Smoked salmon? Fresh hollandaise sauce? Do you want your English muffin toasted to perfection?”

“You’re one to talk,” Eddie scoffs. “I read an article last year that said you spent \$20,000 on a hotel room for a single night in Vegas.”

Wait. Shit.

Richie’s eyes widen as soon as he says that, a sharp smile lighting up his face. Across the table he looms in his chair like a hungry jaguar, stops to lick his teeth like Eddie’s just said something particularly scrumptious.

“Oh, you look me up online do you, Kaspbrak?”

“Kinda hard to avoid you when your giant forehead takes up the entire internet.”

“Za-zing!” Richie crows. “Yowza, baby.”

He leans back in his chair, crossing his arms behind his head like things are just getting interesting. Eddie focuses on his face, does not for one second let his eyes slide over the firm outline of Richie’s biceps or the furred sinew of his forearms. And definitely not at his chest or the broad span of his shoulders. Doesn't think about the way he held Eddie so tight the night before.

“You know what they say about guys with big heads,” Richie says.

“Sure, that it’s compensating for another micro part of the body. I’m talking about your dick, Einstein.”

“Your favourite topic of conversation, am I right?”

“Guys, stop it,” Bill interjects tiredly just before Eddie goes nuclear. “We had a really hard night. Just lay off each other for one minute?”

“Sorry, Bill,” Eddie murmurs as Richie rolls his eyes. He makes an “aye aye captain” salute with a dramatic flick of his fingers before tapping the cigarette again.

They eat in silence; Eddie picking at a croissant until it’s a pile of shreds on his plate. Thinks about how disgusting it is that Richie’s putting his cigarettes directly on the table, but doesn’t say anything for the sake of Bill and the others.

As they drink the dregs of their coffee, Mike says they should head over to their old clubhouse to regroup. They all agree. Even though all Eddie wants is to go back to bed and sleep forever. Maybe wake up back in New York where all of this can be a bad dream. Where Richie Tozier is just an annoying face on his TV screen, and a viral meme that won’t go away no matter if he’s in the supermarket listening to teenage girls screech about him as he’s trying to buy orange juice, or at work where everyone recites their favourite Trashmouth gags around the coffee machine.

Eddie lingers behind the others, wonders if he should bring anything. He thinks they might need supplies. Band-aids maybe. Antiseptic at least. Who knows what could be in the clubhouse after all this time. They could get splinters, or woodlice could borrow into their clothes. He should put a small backpack together with a number of things, and maybe a spare sweater for him just in case.

He runs back downstairs with his stuff, and almost barges into Richie when he appears in the front door to the guest house.

“Hey, what the fuck?”

“We need to talk,” Richie says.

Eddie sucks in a breath, the proximity making his head swim. Over Richie's shoulders the others are waiting, knotted together in conversation.

"If there's one thing I need right now, it's not that."

Eddie is prepared to shoulder past when Richie's palm slaps against the wall next to his head, arm blocking his way. Eddie jumps at the sound of his skin hitting the wood, and looks up at Richie in shock.

"No, really," Richie says. "I insist."

Eddie wants to ignore that weird clenching in his stomach again. And how tall Richie is now. He's an entire head taller than him, maybe more. And somehow over the last 20 years he got fucking stacked. The solid thunk of his shoulders and chest makes Eddie think about the night before, when Richie had taken a chair and killed the creatures that had burst from the fortune cookies. How his forearms had rippled as he brought the chair down, all sinew and veins and dark hair. From this close Eddie can smell his cheap body wash, see each bristle of stubble.

"Congratulations on not reeking today," Eddie bites. "If there's one good thing about coming back to Derry, it's you learning how a shower works."

Richie tilts his head in, as if about to share a very special secret.

"I seem to remember you liking how I smelled," he says, voice low.

Eddie bares his teeth. "Oh yeah, eau de vomit really pushes my buttons."

"That's funny. Maybe you should have been writing my comedy for me."

"I'd do a better job than whoever's doing it now."

Richie laughs in a hoarse little way that makes all the hairs on the back of Eddie's neck stand on end. "God, you're a fucking spitfire as always. Look, I mean it. I need to talk to you. About the things I said last night."

The things. Which one, Eddie wants to ask. The thing about how Eddie had fallen in love with him when they were boys? The thing about Richie taking his virginity and only letting him come when he babbled that he loved him? The thing about how he had wrapped himself around Eddie so tightly he felt like he couldn't breathe when he wasn't around? Which thing exactly?

But Eddie doesn't say any of that. Because how can he.

Eddie looks over Richie's shoulder, focuses on Bill's comforting silhouette on the street as he says, "Didn't you hear what I said to you? I don't want you to say one more word to me for the rest of the time that we're here. I respect Mike when he says we need to do this together, but that doesn't mean we have to speak to one another."

He braces himself for Richie's response, but he's met with silence. A beat passes. And a second. After the third, he looks at Richie to find him looking dazed.

"Richie?"

Richie shakes his head suddenly, blinking his eyes dramatically like he's just woken up.

"Shit, I'm sorry, were you saying something? It's hard for me to concentrate when I know how that snappy little mouth feels sucking my cock."

Eddie's stomach drops through the floor.

"God, you fucking asshole," he breathes, voice on fire, fists clenching until his nails bite into his skin. "Can't believe I'm taking this from a guy who got fired from SNL for snorting cocaine backstage like a total loser."

Richie grins, all teeth and snark. "Kaspbrak, you really have been looking me up online. Were you looking for nudes? Because you could just ask."

"Boys, is there a problem?" Beverly calls, her voice cutting through the tension.

“No, Bev, there’s no problem,” Eddie says, and a second later he’s barging past Richie, their shoulders colliding.

The brief contact leaves a staticky river of memories behind him. It’s a patchwork jumble of smiles and hand holding, though one snapshot stands out the most: Richie’s hand between Eddie’s shoulder blades, pushing him down onto his bed as he mouths at Eddie’s sun-dappled, freckled shoulders. *No one else will ever make you feel the way I do*, his wet mouth says against Eddie’s skin.

Eddie tries not to fall over as he half-runs from the guest house.

*

The walk through town is quiet. Derry really hasn’t changed much, its storefronts filled with old TVs and shop doors plastered with posters for the church bake sale. You’d think it was still 1989. No internet, no mobile phones. Every step brings the oppressive feeling of a dead end, like there’s no chance of ever getting out. The still, ominous air is heightened by the pictures of missing children on every street corner.

Eddie thinks about his mother. The last time he spoke to her before she died four years ago. She had been ranting on the phone about how Derry was falling into sin. How it was being taken over by blacks and queers and money-grubbing kikes. Saying how relieved she was that Eddie had settled down with a nice girl, not like those filthy men who couldn’t keep their hands off each other like feral dogs.

No, mama, he had said, a lump forming in his throat. *Nothing like me.*

As they near the woods, Beverly slows down to walk with him.

“Hey,” she says, bumping her shoulder against his. “Don’t let Richie get to you.”

“It’s fine. I don’t think he knows how to interact with anyone unless he’s being a total dick.”

“You know it’s because you were always his favourite.”

Eddie huffs. "Yeah right."

"It's true. Hey, do you remember the first time we met?"

Eddie looks into that deep well of hidden memories at the back of his head, and he does. He sees Ben covered in blood, falling into the Barrens with his shirt cut to shreds as Eddie clings to Richie, his face in Richie's neck, thinking some monster had emerged from the river. Sees them later in the alleyway, buzzing as he tries to patch Ben up, soothed by the feel of Richie's hand in his hair, lightly petting, as Eddie applies the bandage. Sees Beverly coming round the corner in the drug store. Bill and Ben looking at her with huge cartoon heart eyes.

"I do remember," he says. "You helped us steal the supplies for Ben."

"You were the sweetest thing. There with your fanny pack and bifocals, talking about blood infections. I thought Ben was going to pass out on you."

They smile at each other, a distance from the others now. Beverly's eyes flit down to his wedding ring.

"So how's married life treating you?"

He thinks of Myra back home. The way he had hung up on her. How he hasn't looked at his phone once since he's been here. Guilt prickles at him.

"It's good," he says lightly. "You know, the usual."

"What's her name?"

"Myra."

He glances at Beverly, careful not to look at the bruise on the side of her face, the ones half hidden by the cuffs of her jacket. The bruises a dark mirror of the ones she carried as a girl, running from her dad's apartment, blue eyes scratched red with tears and her hair in disarray. Always pretending everything was okay, even as she trembled and smoked three cigarettes in a row.

"How about you? I hear about you all the time. It's amazing how successful you've been. I read about you in Vogue last year."

Bev laughs at that, teasing him about reading Vogue. Eddie attests it's because they belonged to Myra and he needed something to read before bed. Not that secretly he liked looking at the sleek men's suits, the hard lines and sharp corners. Before long they're at the edge of the trees. The others have disappeared into the thicket, but Richie has stopped to have a smoke, face set moodily as he takes a long drag on the cigarette.

Beverly gives Eddie a look; it's as unreadable as the grey sky behind her.

"It's bound to feel strange, you know. Seeing Richie. We were all very close, but the two of you had the most intense bond. I meant what I said about you being his favourite. You two were inseparable."

Eddie shifts uncomfortably, but he knows he can trust Bev. "What do you remember about us, from that summer? Me and Richie?"

"Erm..." Beverly smiles. "He teased you constantly. You were always the one he picked on the most. It drove you up the wall. He completely adored you though." She pauses for a second, and then, "Still does."

"What?"

"I can tell. He gets that same glint in his eye when he looks at you. Like he's looking at something precious, even when he's being a prick. He always loved getting a rise out of you. I think he liked seeing you get mad because it meant he was having an effect on you."

Something precious.

"Why did he leave then?"

It's out of his mouth before he can stop it. Beverly notices his grimace.

"Oh Eddie," she says, voice soft. "I'm sure that had nothing to do

with you. He wanted to get out of here more than anyone else did.”

But he promised, a small, frightened voice says in his head. *He promised we’d always be together.*

“Richie was always complicated.”

“Sure,” he says, rubbing at a spot on his chest, just above his heart. He hasn’t suffered from a panic attack in years, but he’s had that tell-tale low-level thrum under his skin ever since he arrived in Derry yesterday. Ever since Richie walked into the Jade of the Orient and looked at him across the table and said, “So you married a woman?” like Eddie’s life was one huge joke.

Beverly looks around and lowers her voice conspiratorially. “He grew up to be a bit of a honey though, right?”

Eddie’s mouth falls open. “What?”

She laughs, and in her smile Eddie sees the young, flame-haired girl they had all loved that summer. For Eddie it wasn’t desire like it had been for Bill and Ben, but something similar to how he thought he’d feel for a big sister. He remembers the afternoon she had complimented his grid shorts and coral t-shirt and how his heart had swelled all the way home.

“Okay, put some actual nice clothes on him and make him get a proper haircut. But then I think we’d have a certified hunk on our hands.”

“I don’t-” Eddie shakes his head. “I mean, it’s *Richie*. Buck-toothed Richie who once wore a Hawaiin shirt and board shorts to his aunt’s wedding.”

But even as he’s saying it he’s looking at Richie again. Feels his eyes glued to his shoulders and the sharp cut of his jaw. His hollowed cheeks as he sucks on the cigarette, exhaling smoke through his nose.

“He always did want to look good for you,” Beverly says.

“What?” Eddie says again, feeling like a total idiot.

Bev laughs and leaves Eddie there gawping. When he looks toward the woods again, Richie is watching him. Eddie's entire body tightens, like the body of an animal that smells danger on the wind. Richie just winks at him, dark eyes unfathomable behind the blue smoke of the cigarette.

*

Inside the clubhouse is just how Eddie remembers it. It was a place where they could be together, where they could be themselves. Away from the pressure and the eyes of parents. A cocoon they had made for each other. Every object Eddie touches ghosts with memory: the hammock him and Richie fought over, the paddleboard he had used to terrorise Stanley. Stan. Just thinking of his name felt like pressing on a bruise.

After they share their memories of Stan, the one vital piece of their puzzle that was missing, they drift apart to look at things in the clubhouse. Eddie glares at Richie as he loudly rummages around a pile of books in the corner, getting between them with eager fingers. He finally gets his hands on something that makes him shoot up like a reed, eyes glowing madly.

"Jackpot," he says with a mischievous grin. He turns around with a clutch of old Polaroids in his hands.

"Check these babies out," he says, throwing them into Eddie's lap. Eddie peers at one of them. They're faded and dog-eared and he's confused by the lines of pale skin and dark hair. He's about to ask Richie what the hell they are, but then he sees one that makes his heart race.

They're pictures of Eddie and Richie. But not the ones that were ever displayed in each other's houses, framed on their walls and scattered next to their beds. These are smutty snapshots, completely inappropriate. They're pictures of Eddie naked.

"Whatcha got there?" Ben calls over, curiously.

"Nothing!" Eddie squawks, clutching the pictures to his chest while Richie, that asshole, laughs his guts out in the corner.

"I have to get some air," he says, a little too loudly, making all the others stop to look at him as he forces his way out of the clubhouse. As the crisp fall air hits him, he feels dizzy and almost bends over to be sick.

Richie's not far behind him, watching him quietly as he flips frantically through the pictures.

"Why the hell would you keep these here?"

Richie shrugs, like they're talking about the weather and not the faded teenage pornography he'd stashed in the fucking clubhouse. "Couldn't risk my sister finding them in my room. Anyway, I was at yours most nights. Needed something here to jerk off to when I got horny."

Eddie rounds on him, appalled, the pictures splashed protectively against his chest. He can't believe his younger self would humiliate himself like this. Wants to go back in time and slap him across the face, ask him what the hell he was thinking and to get the fuck away from Richie Tozier.

"You jerked off in the *clubhouse*?"

"No need to sound so precious. You sucked me off here too."

"Fuck off, Richie," he hisses, spinning away from him. "I wouldn't do that."

"You just don't remember yet," Richie says, and it suddenly sounds like he's right behind him. "But you were desperate for me."

"No I wasn't, stop talking about it."

"You still don't remember how much you wanted me?"

"No!"

"The pictures should help jog some memories. Go on, look at them."

And Eddie doesn't want to, but he does.

Some of them are deceptively innocent: a picture of Eddie and Richie's clasped hands, the two of them sharing an ice cream cone, a close-up of Eddie's right cheek where a dimple pops mid-smile. But the others unfold like the petals of a lurid red flower.

There's one of Eddie from the neck down, with Richie's hand curled around his waist to tug him closer to the camera. Richie's skin is chillingly white against Eddie's tanned waist and his hand looks huge on Eddie's small body. There's a close-up of Eddie's lower face as he sucks on a lollipop, his tongue flicking out to wet the end. There's another close-up of his bruised collarbone, skin smudged in violent, purple hickies like a painting of a storm. Another of the boys kissing open-mouthed, Eddie's face half-obsured by Richie's dark curls, his tongue between Eddie's lips. Another of Eddie on his knees in what looks like Richie's bedroom, his eyes hooded as he looks up at the camera between Richie's legs.

Then there's one that makes Eddie want to die. It's 17-year-old Eddie, naked apart from a pair of white knee socks, legs curled to his chest shyly. Perched on his nose are a pair of cheap heart-shaped sunglasses that Richie probably stole from the drug store. He's smiling lightly and written in Richie's messy scrawl at the bottom of the picture is DOLORES HAZE next to a big cartoon heart.

"You thought you were so smart," he mutters, but he knows he's blushing, flipping the picture to the bottom of the pile.

Richie reaches over his shoulder and takes them from him. He whistles long and low as he flips through them, making Eddie burn bright red.

"Holy fuck, these are nice," Richie groans, looking at a shot of Eddie taken from behind. He's lying down on Richie's bed, and the camera tracks the plane of his back and the swell of his ass, as Eddie smiles, face half hidden in his arm.

"I'm keeping these," Richie says.

Eddie's mouth falls open. "The fuck you are!"

"Hey, I took these. That makes them mine." That little smirk curls

around his lips; the one from last night. "Or maybe I should show the others." He jerks his head toward the clubhouse. "Maybe they can provide some clarity on the nature of our relationship as you're so confused."

Eddie feels something like horror claw at his stomach. "Stop it, Richie."

"You know when you tell me to stop, all I want to do is the opposite."

"You wouldn't do it, you wouldn't show them."

"You sound pretty certain for a guy who can't seem to remember fucking anything about me." Richie flicks through the pictures, considering. "All of this clown hunting makes me so tense. I wouldn't mind jerking it to these."

Eddie sees red. "You're not having them, you huge pervert!"

Before he knows what he's doing, Eddie is launching himself at Richie. The impact knocks Richie off balance and they fall to the forest floor in a tangle of limbs, the impact broken slightly by a heap of wet leaves. With Richie winded beneath him, Eddie finally gets his hands on the pictures, scratching them from Richie's grasp as his heart stutters. Richie recovers quickly, and he uses Eddie's small moment of triumph to roll them over. And suddenly Richie is on top of him, pushing him into the hard ground with his full six-foot-three weight.

"I'm not going to let you take them so you can jerk off to teenage me!" Eddie snaps, tensing as he realises the position they're in. How it would look to anyone who might happen to walk past.

Richie smirks down at Eddie. "Maybe I could jerk off to the real thing instead?"

Heat pools in Eddie's cheeks, his lower stomach tightening. There's a hot lick of a memory, like summer heat behind his eyelids. Richie's hand on his dick, eyes hooded, jacking himself slowly as he watches Eddie strip out of his t-shirt and shorts.

Eddie swallows. "Get off me, Richie."

“Why should I?”

“Because I said so.”

Richie’s eyes do that thing again: that sly, half-lidded thing, like a storm cloud about to erupt. Eddie’s entire body stiffens in warning.

“Does it frighten you?”

“What?”

“The pictures.” Richie’s eyes track Eddie’s mouth down to his collarbone where his shirt has been pulled to the side. “The revelation that buttoned-up Eddie Kaspbrak was a little exhibitionist. If I’d wanted you to be naked all the time you would have done it. It got you hot to strip for me.”

Eddie feels his face go up in flames.

“You must have coerced me or something.”

“Oh yeah, sure. Total coercion. I know that makes you feel better about it. That you were just a sweet young thing, like butter wouldn’t melt, and that the big, bad Richie wolf trapped you and forced you to take off all your clothes.”

Eddie’s heart is hammering in his throat. He gets his hands up to Richie’s shoulders. The thick, wide span of them. Feels the muscle there.

“I said get off me, Richie. The others are going to-”

“Is this how your wife touches you?”

Then Richie’s hand is moving, getting between Eddie’s body and the ground to cup his ass through his jeans. Richie’s hand is so big it covers the span of an entire cheek, and he uses it to squeeze the soft flesh there. Eddie inhales sharply at the tight grip.

“Stop it, Richie. I fucking mean it.”

“Tell me how she touches you. Tell me and I’ll stop.”

Eddie's about to tell him to fuck off when one of Richie's thick fingers presses against the seam of his jeans, the tip of it prodding right over the part that opened so eagerly for Richie when they were teens. And Eddie wants him to stop but at the same time a small part of him, buried deep down, recognises the touch. It's so confusing he wants to cry. Because if Richie doesn't stop touching him he doesn't know what he'll do.

"She doesn't!" he says desperately. "No one's ever touched me like this."

Richie edges back, fingers dropping from their tight grip on his ass. Eddie almost cries out, though he's not sure if it's from relief or not.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I've never been with anyone else. No one's ever touched me but you."

As soon as it's out of his mouth he regrets it. Shame floods through him, drowning all the heat. Because it's true. He's never done this, never wanted to do this. Not with anyone. Not with the couple of meagre dates he'd forced himself to go on at college, only there because the girls had courted him. Saying how sweet and shy he was. Not with Myra. He couldn't touch her, couldn't do it. He'd had a full-on panic attack on their wedding night, peeling out of his suit in their hotel bathroom, pale chest blotching with nerves. But somehow she hadn't minded. Said he was her sweet Eddie Bear as she stroked her hand down his trembling foal legs. No wonder he'd been convinced, until just last night, that he was a virgin.

Richie is looking at him with wide, shocked eyes.

"Don't make fun of me, please," Eddie says quietly, turning his face so he doesn't have to look at Richie.

Richie's voice shakes when he says, "You've only been with me?"

Eddie nods, closing his eyes. He presses his cheek to the damp fall leaves.

"Baby, look at me," Richie says, reaching out to touch his cheek

when-

“Are we interrupting something?” Bill asks, the others standing behind him at the mouth to the clubhouse.

“Oh my god,” Eddie yelps. He manages to push Richie off him before struggling up and brushing the leaves off his clothes. Richie follows much more languidly, grinning at the Losers as they all look at him with raised eyebrows.

“What are you doing?”

“Just wrastling,” Richie sniffs, rolling his shoulders. “Needed to get out all the tension. Turns out that clown hunting is a bit of a drag.”

Bill makes a face. “Seriously?”

Mike starts laughing, shaking his head. “Totally figures. Think I lost count of the times I’d walk in on you two on top of each other.”

“You’ve got no idea,” Richie says. Eddie punches him on the arm.

“Ouch,” Richie says, though he doesn't sound like it hurt at all. “Kitty’s still got claws, huh?”

Beverly meets Eddie's eyes before pointedly blinking at the mud streaked on his jeans and jacket. Eddie looks away, face as red as a fire truck.

Mike explains the plan. They need their totems. They need to split up and meet back up at the guest house when they all have them.

“No offence but this is a really fucking dumb idea,” Richie says.

“I’m with Richie on this one,” he admits, agreeing with him for the first time.

“Yeah and Shortcake over here definitely can’t go by himself. Have you seen how tiny he is? He’s like prime clown chowder.”

“Actually I’ve changed my mind.”

As everyone starts to leave, Richie waits until the others are out of earshot before tugging him back with a firm grip on his arm.

“Screw what Mike says. Let me come with you.”

Eddie blinks at him. “And be alone with you again? You’re fucking deluded. Also, touch me again and I’m fucking suing you for sexual harassment. I have a great lawyer and he’ll smoke you. See how good that is for your career comeback.”

Richie lets his hand drop, arches an eyebrow at him. “What’s your totem going to be anyway? The shorts you wore when we first fucked? Think your virgin blood’s going to be the thing that saves the day?”

“Christ, Richie,” he says. And then looks at him sharply. “Wait, what do you mean the first time?” First time as in, there were other times?”

Richie laughs, the high-pitched, mocking scratch of it getting all his hairs on end again. “Baby, you are in for a real sweet surprise.”

Eddie leaves him there laughing to himself, the smutty Polaroids burning a hole in his bag.

*

Like many things in Eddie’s life, things just go from bad to worse. Because six hours later, he’s back at the guest house, his face in Beverly’s lap as he groans. He’d got back from the encounter with his mother and the leper, totem in hand, as he wheezed from an asthma condition he didn’t even have. But there had been no chance to rest, not with Henry Bowers waiting for him in his bedroom.

Seeing him brought back all the memories of the bullying when they were boys. How Bowers and all his grubby asshole friends would wolf whistle at him as he walked down the street. *Hey, queer boy, how many dicks have you taken today? Think you could take us all at the same time?* Even though Eddie was only 13 and was just learning what being gay meant and how men had sex together.

Things had been better when they were teenagers. Because one day

after school Richie had cornered one of the boys who liked to taunt Eddie and in an act that had rattled them all, driven the heel of his hand into the boy's face until his nose was a massacre of blood and bone. Despite their shock, the Losers had instantly all covered for Richie when the police came sniffing around, saying he'd been with them the entire time as they studied for exams. And Eddie would never admit it to anyone, but it had made him burn hot when he found out what Richie had done. Had made him keen when Richie described to him in achingly vivid detail how the other boy had cried out from the pain, while he stroked Eddie inside his shorts and bit down on the tendon in his neck. *No one fucking hurts my boy*, Richie had said, as he jerked Eddie off until he came.

It took a single second for that memory to burst blood-red inside his head, giving Bowers the opportunity to knock him to the floor. Then pressing the knife into Eddie's cheek, rank breath on his voice as he whispered, *You always were a little fag, Kaspbrak. How do you think it'll feel getting fucked by my knife?* before Bill had burst in just in time and pushed Bowers out the window.

Now he's lying on the couch with his head in Beverly's lap, cheek tender beneath the bandage, swimming in and out of the conversation she's having with Bill as he paces around the room, arms crossed tightly to his chest. Ben stands in the background stoically, looking at the clock.

When Richie gets back, it's with the speed and noise of a hurricane. They all freeze as he enters the room, positions caught like some morbid stage act. As soon as he walks in, Richie's eyes zero in on Eddie's head in Beverly's lap before trailing to the fresh bandage on his cheek.

"What the fuck's going on?"

"Something happened to Eddie," Bill says, and Eddie admires how calm he sounds.

"Yeah, no fucking shit, Bill. *What?*"

"It was Henry Bowers, Richie," Beverly says, her hand stroking through Eddie's hair, as if anything could distract him from the

mounting wave of rage flooding across Richie's face. "He got into Eddie's room when we were gone and attacked him."

"Bowers? What's that mullet-wearing asshole doing here?"

"Mullet-wearing asshole," Eddie laughs quietly against Beverly's shirt, the memory of the Losers' rock fight unfolding behind his eyes.

"It's Pennywise," Bill says. "IT's controlling him. Using him to come after us."

"Bowers did this to him?"

And Richie's got that look in his eyes again. The one he'd had at the restaurant the night before, when the grotesqueries had burst out of the fortune cookies and cornered Eddie. A primal kind of darkness that Eddie didn't understand. Was frightened of looking at too closely.

"You were supposed to look after him," he says to Bill.

What the hell did that mean? Had they been talking about him behind his back?

"I know," Bill says. "I messed up."

Somethings like a shadow falls across Richie's face. "We have to find Bowers."

Bill shakes his head, like he knew Richie was going to say that. "No way."

"No? Have you seen what the fuck he's done to him? He stabbed him through the fucking face!" Richie's voice rises until he's almost shouting.

"I know and we're all angry but you can't go after him."

Richie's mouth twists, upper lip curling up in a snarl. "Don't tell me what to do."

"Richie, for fuck's sake."

But Richie doesn't back down, never has. In a second he's crossed the room, getting up in Bill's face as the air around them crackles. "That's all you ever do, isn't it, hot shot? Push us around. You don't give a fuck about anyone but yourself."

"That's not fair. You know that's not true."

"Eddie needs to rest, Bill," Beverly cuts in. "We're not going to Neibolt, not tonight."

"We don't have a choice!" Bill looks desperate now, his hair on end, face white. And he looks so old, Eddie realises sadly. They'd never had the luxury of normal childhoods after what happened with Pennywise, and it had taken its toll on all of them in different ways.

"God, you're a selfish bastard," Richie says. "You almost got Eddie killed once. Dragging us into that fucking house when it was the last place we wanted to be. Remember how he fell through the floor while you were too busy looking for Georgie to give a fuck about us? How his arm snapped?"

"I didn't mean for that to happen, you know that!"

"Do I? Because it feels like we were just collateral damage."

And Eddie knows what happened because Richie had told him. The way Bill had struck him, the fight that had almost ended their friendships. Richie had come running to Eddie's house the next day, had snuck through the window and kissed his arm, all the way from his palm to the cast over his elbow. Eddie had shushed him, wiped his tears away with his free hand. Things had never been the same between Richie and Bill after that.

"We can't do this," Ben says from the back of the room. "If we're not aligned we have no chance of beating IT. He's going to tear us apart."

"Shut the fuck up, Ben," Richie says, not taking his eyes off Bill.

Beverly looks at Richie, shocked. "Don't talk to him like that, Richie!"

"It has to be tonight," Bill says quietly. "It has to be."

"Well you know what, Big Bill? I'm taking Eddie and we're getting the fuck out of here right now. I don't give a shit about your little rescue mission. We're leaving and I don't give a fuck how many more kids that motherfucker eats."

Bill looks at him, horrified. "What? You can't *leave*."

"Fucking watch us."

The thought of Richie taking Eddie and driving away with him makes Eddie's pulse heavily in his neck, but he tries to ignore it.

"I'm not leaving, Richie," he says, face stinging when he speaks. "If Bill says we need to do it tonight then we have to."

Eddie flinches as Richie turns on him. "Oh yeah? Because you'll always follow Bill, right? What the fuck does it matter when you have him?"

"It's not like that, Richie," Eddie says. And maybe Ben's right. Maybe the splinters between all of them will be the thing to end them.

"You know we need to finish this," he continues. "You know we're the only ones who can stop IT."

"Don't you mean you and Bill? Maybe we should just all stay here while the two of you finish it, and then you can walk off together into the fucking sunset like you always wanted."

And this was the other thing. Richie's jealousy of Bill. It had always been there, simmering beneath the surface even as kids. Maybe it was the way Bill had always been the unofficial leader of the group. Maybe it was the way he had been friends with Eddie first. Or maybe it was the way Eddie had looked at Bill sometimes, long before he'd understood his feelings for Richie.

Beverly sighs. "We really don't have time for this."

Rich turns back to Bill. "If you're too pussy to go after Bowers then I will. I'm going to find him and you can't do a fucking thing to stop me."

Bill blocks the way out of the room. "You're not going anywhere I said."

"Bill, let him go!" Beverly says. And eventually Bill does. Because Richie isn't a boy anymore. He isn't that scrawny scrap of a thing that threw himself at Bill like a wild dog. With his tiny noodle arms and tiny legs. He was bigger than Bill now, bigger and stronger. And that fight may have gone Bill's way when they were boys, but it wouldn't now, and everyone in the room knew it.

Bill's face contorts as Richie storms out the guest house, door slamming behind him. "You have no idea what he's going to do," he whispers.

The memory of Richie cornering that boy in the alley pings between the four of them. None of them had seen it, but they all remember the way Richie has tumbled into the clubhouse hours later, hands caked in dried blood up to the wrists, something savage in his eyes.

"I think I do," Beverly says.

*

Eddie's not sure if it's hours or minutes later when Richie returns. Eddie's been fading in and out, head swimming with memories, the hallucination of the leper, of Richie's words. The kisses they shared, the way Richie had touched him. They're infused with heat: Richie pressing Eddie up against the bleachers at school, Eddie's legs wide to let Richie in. Richie licking his way up Eddie's inner thigh, making him gasp when he bites down on the soft skin. There are softer ones too: Richie whispering "*I'm going to love you for the rest of my life*" as they slow dance by the lake on prom night.

When Eddie wakes up, it's to tears running down his cheeks. Beverly shifts where she'd been dozing next to him.

"Are you okay?" she asks, sitting up at the sight of his tears.

"I loved him," Eddie whispers, not sure whether he's still dreaming, if it's the past or the present. All his new memories whisper at him, of the summer when they fought Pennywise; of the first time Eddie met

Richie when they were five; of the kisses, and love confessions; of driving in Richie's truck with the radio on and the windows open; of the promises they made to each other under a full moon, the ones Richie broke.

"I loved him and he left me."

Beverly's about to answer when the door to the guest house opens. They turn in time to see Richie walk through the door looking exhausted, stiffening when they see his face and neck spattered with fresh blood.

"It's done," he says to Bill in the hallway, voice low and flat. "Now we can go get your fucking clown. Tell me when we're heading off." He walks up the stairs without another word. Before they can call after him, Mike appears in the doorway. He must have been trailing Richie back to the guest house. But there's something wrong. Even from across the room, Eddie can see how frightened he is, how he shivers like a spooked horse.

"Mike? What happened?" Bill asks as Mike walks into into the drawing room.

He looks at all of them, the whites of his eyes glimmering. "He killed him."

Bill's arms drop from where they've been crossed against his chest. "What?"

"Richie. He killed Bowers."

They all look at each other, shock turning them silent.

Eddie edges his way up the cushions until he's sitting up, ignores the pain in his cheek as he says, "How did he do it?"

Beverly cuts her eyes at him, startled. "We don't need to know that."

"No, I do. Tell me." And he needs to know. He's never needed to know anything else.

Mike swallows, beckons for a glass of water from the pitcher on a

side table. They wait patiently as Ben pours him a glass and Mike brings it to his mouth with trembling hands. "We found him in the library," he says finally. "He was lurking at the back by the stacks. Richie, I've never seen him like that. He sniffed him out, like he knew exactly where he was. A fight broke out between them. And then..."

"It's okay, Mike, don't force yourself," Bill says.

But Mike presses on, not listening. "Richie had a knife. Took it out of his back pocket while they fought. He slit his throat."

Beverly's hands fly to her mouth. "What?"

Mike looks at Bill, and something haunted passes over his eyes. "I wanted to stop him, Bill, I did. But Richie was something else."

"But it was self-defence, right?" Ben asks. "Richie wouldn't just- he wouldn't just *murder* someone in cold blood."

Mike just shakes his head. "It wasn't self-defence. Bowers wasn't doing anything, when we found him he was just crouched there babbling to himself. Richie saw him and he- he knocked him to the ground and slit his throat. He didn't even hesitate."

"It's Derry," Bill murmurs, "it's this fucking place. It does things to people, twists us up inside."

Mike's hand continues to tremble on his drink, and Beverly reaches out to take it from him before he spills it.

"It's true," Mike says. "Derry takes all our worst qualities and amplifies them. What Richie did, it was to protect Eddie."

"And Richie's always wanted to protect Eddie," Ben says. "Ever since we were kids."

They sit there in silence for a few minutes, soaking in what Richie had done. Soaking, like the bloody footprints tracking through the hallway.

Bill is the first one to break the silence. "It still needs to be tonight," he says quietly.

"Jesus, Bill," Beverly snaps. "Stop it! Stop fucking saying that! Haven't you been listening at all?"

"We don't have a choice. If we don't do it tonight we never will."

"Bill's right," Mike says, some of the tremble faded from his voice. "It has to be tonight. Pennywise will only get stronger. And he knows that we're divided. If we wait until tomorrow, I don't know if we'll be able to do it at all."

Ben sighs, looking at the staircase. "If that's the case, who's going to get Richie?"

"I will," Eddie whispers. The others all turn to look at him.

"That might not be a good idea," Ben says. "He's volatile at the moment, and-"

"He's only ever been worse around you," Bill finishes, mirroring Ben's frown.

"He'll listen to me," Eddie says. And he just hopes he's right.

"I don't want to take that risk," Bill says firmly. "I'll go."

"Because that's going to go swimmingly," Beverly mutters, rolling her eyes.

"Bev, he just murdered someone and you want to send Eddie up there? What if he hurts him?"

"Richie would never hurt Eddie," Beverly says as she looks at Eddie. "Not like that anyway."

"What the hell does that mean?" Bill asks, but Beverly doesn't reply.

"Just give me a few minutes," Eddie says, and he pulls himself away from the group, side-stepping Bill when he tries to reach out.

The walk to Richie's room feels like it takes forever; every step and inch of hallway feels shrouded in gloom. Had Richie really murdered Bowers? Was there any chance Mike could have got it wrong?

"Fuck off," Richie barks through the door when Eddie finds the courage to knock.

"Richie," he says, resting his palms on the wood. "Richie, it's me, let me in."

There's silence for a moment, and then the door is opening and Richie is pulling Eddie into the room with a sharp tug on his arm.

As soon as he's inside, Richie crowds him up against the door, leaving no space between them. Eddie gasps, feeling like all the air's been punched from his chest, but for the first time since coming back to Derry, he doesn't try to push him away. Richie looks down at him, breathing heavily, and Eddie's reminded again of just how strong he is. How easily he could make Eddie do anything he wanted.

From this close, Richie looks like a wild animal. His hair in disarray, breath hot on Eddie's cheek, stubble even rougher than it looked this morning. His eyes dark behind his glasses. Then there's the blood, streaked across his cheek and down his neck, so dark it looks almost black.

"You have blood on your face," he stutters, anything to distract himself from the way Richie's looking at him.

"It's not mine."

Eddie shivers.

"Let me get a wet cloth and I'll clean you up." He manages to extricate himself from Richie's grip, pushing him back gently with his palms against his shoulders. Richie lets him go, though Eddie feels his eyes track him as he walks across the room. In the bathroom mirror, Eddie hates how exhausted he looks, skin pallid, purple blooming under his eyes. Under the bandage, a spot of blood peeks through.

How did we get like this, pal? he thinks as he pictures his younger self, the cast blanketing him from wrist to elbow. *How did things get so bad?*

"How's your cheek feeling?" Richie asks, when Eddie walks back into the bedroom. He's moved to sit on at the foot of the bed, and Eddie

hesitates for a second before joining him. He makes sure their legs don't touch.

"Sore, but I think it'll be okay," he says as he dabs at Richie's cheek. "Beverly cleaned it for me with the stuff I had in my bag."

"Good thing you always come prepared, huh?"

Eddie doesn't answer. He doesn't think he was prepared for any of this.

They sit in silence for a few minutes as Eddie cleans the blood off his face. Richie looks tired and pale beneath the splatter and Eddie swallows, not sure what to say as he looks down at the crimson shock of Bowers' blood against the white cloth.

"Mike told us what happened. Did you really kill him?" he whispers.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"He hurt you."

Eddie looks up at Richie. That dark, fathomless expression is back.

"You killed him because he hurt me?"

"He wasn't going to get away with it."

Maybe the fight with Bowers or the blood loss has made him crazy, but before he really knows what he's doing, Eddie's reaching out and tracing his fingertips over the ridges of Richie's face. He maps his cheekbones, his nose, the long slope of his forehead. Sense memory prickles his fingertips, all the times he touched Richie's face growing up, from batting at his cheek when Richie made kissy faces at him when they were kids to pulling him in when they were teenagers and Eddie needed to get his lips on him. When he trails the pads of his fingers over the arch of Richie's jawline, the strong, sharp line of it that had been taunting him on his computer screen for years, Richie's nose flares.

"That's two of Bowers' gang you've taken out now," Eddie says, the words quivering.

Richie frowns at him. "Huh?"

"Shawn Sawyer, remember him? The boy in the alley."

Eddie can almost see the memory light up behind Richie's eyes. "Oh yeah," he huffs. "That cunt was asking for it too."

Eddie doesn't reply, too distracted by the fizzles of heat under his skin. Asking for it because he had touched Eddie.

"Did you find your totem?" Richie asks.

Eddie nods. "Yeah, I saw my mom. Or what I thought was my mom. And the leper. The one that followed me around Derry when we were kids."

"Shit, that sucks. Did it hurt you?"

Eddie shakes his head. "No, I got away. Thought I was safe, until I got back here."

"Fuck, I'd kill him again if I could. I'd kill anyone who thinks they can touch you."

Oh god.

"I lied, Richie. About the leper," he blurts.

"What do you mean?"

"I always told you and the others it was leper, which made sense because I was so scared of getting sick. But it wasn't..." He stops, swallows, not sure why he's talking about this. "It was a man with AIDs. Or what I thought AIDs was when we were kids. Like the horror stories you'd read about in the newspaper, all the gross rumours kids swapped at school. You know what it was like in Derry, how people twisted everything. My mom said that men who touched each other like that, they had this sickness inside them, like an open sore, and it rotted them from the inside out."

"That fucking bitch," Richie mutters.

"So I don't get it," Eddie presses on, something frantic caught in his throat. "Why we did all the things we did? How you could have made me-"

Richie's hand come down and smacks against the mattress, making Eddie jump.

"Stop fucking saying that," he snaps. "Stop saying I made you all the time, like you didn't have a fucking choice. I didn't make you do anything. You were in love with me. You wanted it as much as I did."

"Then why do you remember so much more than I do?"

"Because you're still scared. You're repressing all these memories of us because you're scared of what I meant to you. You're fucking gay, Eddie," he snarls, making Eddie flinch back from him. "That's why you were so scared of AIDs when we were kids. The closest you ever got to a girl growing up was holding Beverly's hand as you walked to the ice cream parlour. Your fucked-up shambles of a marriage doesn't change that."

Eddie feels his chest fill with heat. God *damn* Richie Tozier.

"How the fuck do you know it's a shambles? You don't fucking know anything about my life!"

"No, but I know you. And you haven't said one word about her since we've been here. I'd almost think you were making it up if you didn't have that fucking thing on." He jerks his head at Eddie's wedding ring. "What was it, Eddie? Couldn't bear the fact that the perfect little guy you saw in the mirror was a fag? Had to run and get married to the first woman who reminded you of your mother, to stop it being true?"

Fag. He thinks of all the times Bowers' gang had spat that at Eddie as he walked past. *Little fucking fag, come suck my dick if you want it so bad.*

"Sorry I wasn't going around fucking every guy I saw for 20 years. How liberating that must have been for you."

"At least I'm not lying to myself about who I am. That's all you've done the entire time we've been here."

"You don't understand. It's been so much easier for you. Being rich, being famous. You can do whatever you want."

Richie reels back. "You think this is easy for me? I see the man that I was in love with after 23 years, and he's moved on, He's married and has some normal peachy pie fucking life. And worse, he can't even bear to fucking look at me. And yeah, I've fucked a lot of people. I've never been a saint. But I never fell in love with anyone. I never had a real relationship, never felt anything for the people I brought home. And I did that for 20 years, thinking the entire time that something was wrong with me, that I was fucking broken inside. You think that was easy?"

Eddie shakes his head, Richie's words slicing through him. "No," he says quietly.

He looks down at the bloody cloth, wrings it between his fingers until all he can see is red.

"Something else happened this afternoon. When I was looking for my totem."

"What?"

"I walked through Derry and I could feel us everywhere. Not the Losers, but you and me. Everywhere I went it was like, there was this ghost of us there." Eddie struggles to put it into words, doesn't think he's making any sense, but Richie just nods.

"That's because we went everywhere together," he says. "I don't think there was any corner of Derry where we didn't go, where we weren't together. Do you remember how we'd find these hidden spaces around town where we'd cuddle? We never told the others. We'd just disappear after school and you'd cling to me for hours, not saying anything, just asking me to hold you."

Eddie nods. It was in the months after Pennywise, and Eddie had been so sure that if Richie didn't hold him he was going to fade into

nothing. He sees them as boys huddled in an alley, Eddie pressing so hard against Richie it's like he's trying to disappear inside him. Richie holds him so tight it hurts but Eddie just buries into his embrace, asks Richie to hold him harder. Not understanding why he needs it, but asking for it anyway. And Richie does, the bottom of his glasses digging into Eddie's head as his arms get impossibly tighter around him, making him gasp.

"It was hard. After the clown."

"Yeah, baby. I know." Richie rolls his shoulders, works out a crick in his neck. The movement brings out the strength of his shoulders again, brings Eddie's eyes to the broad span of them. Thinks again just how much Richie has filled out over the years.

And god does he hate all of this. He'd spent years building up his armour. Never letting anyone get inside. He hadn't even cried at his mother's funeral. Felt nothing on the day he got married. Now, every second he's around Richie he feels like he's dying.

"You were the only one I felt safe with," Eddie whispers, staring at a spot of blood on Richie's hand. "Thought you'd make fun of me forever for it."

"I couldn't. I liked it too much," he says, as Eddie's heart skips a beat. "Loved how much you needed me."

Richie sucks on his teeth, looks like he's on the verge of saying something but thinking better of it.

"What is it? Tell me."

"I was thinking... about that day at Neibolt. About being the one who snapped your arm back into place. How I liked being the only one who could do that to you. Touch you like that. Like I could make you hurt, or put you back together again. Whatever I wanted."

"Fuck."

Eddie turns away, doesn't even want to think about what Richie's words mean, but Richie grabs his wrist.

“Richie-”

“Tell me what else you remember about us.”

“I can’t, it’s all a jumble.”

Richie's grip gets tighter, and Eddie sucks in a breath at the bright blot of pain that explodes in his hand.

“Remember the first time you sucked my dick?”

Eddie clenches his eyes shut. “No.”

“Okay, so I'll tell you. We were 17. You asked me if you could, after school when you were at my house. You got close and whispered in my ear, 'Richie, I wanna blow you,' like I could ever turn that down. Like I hadn't been fantasising about that for years. But you were scared of germs. Wouldn't do anything the first time but suck on the head. These little kitten licks up and down. You looked up at me the entire time, it made me crazy. When I wanted to cum, I told you to stick out your tongue and I jerked off on it. Came on your mouth and and all over your face.”

The memory burns through him and he sees it: Eddie's tongue out as he looks up at Richie, digging his fingers into the carpet under his legs. Richie's hand stripping his deck, ropes of his cum hitting Eddie's mouth and tongue as he groans like an animal.

“The first time I fingered you, you cried.”

“Oh my god, Richie stop,” he moans, but Richie just continues squeezing his wrist.

“Listen to me. You were convinced you wouldn't like it. That it was gross, it was going to hurt. You had this pouty little face on you the whole time leading up to it. Except when I finally got a finger inside you, you loved it. I remember how you shifted on my hand, how full it made you. Just got two fingers in you the first time and you made these noises I'd never heard before. And then I found your sweet spot, hammered at it even when you got too sensitive and told me to stop. I made you cum so hard you cried, didn't even need to put a hand on your dick.”

The words hit Eddie like sun-stroke, the hot, woozy heat of it making him feel drunk.

"I liked it?"

"You fucking loved it. Then you wanted it all the time. I fingered you in your bedroom, the clubhouse, in the park, behind the bleachers at school. You couldn't get enough of it. Then we fucked and that became your favourite thing. It was like you couldn't think straight unless I was inside you, it was so fucking hot. Even though it hurt you that first time, you wanted it again. We'd go driving and you'd make me pull over so you could ride me in the back of the truck. You'd ask to suck on my fingers while I fucked you. Said you liked being filled up both ends."

Eddie quivers, imagining how that would feel. How overwhelming it would be. The salt on Richie's fingers in his mouth. Cheeks hollowed around his skin as Richie's dick shoves inside him. How much it would hurt if they did it now. If Richie would hold him down, make him take it. The thought of it, of Richie getting him down on the bed and doing that to him, makes his stomach go tight. He feels himself stir in his jeans.

"We should stop now," he says, but even as he says it he feels empty. His entire body clenches, like he wants to suck Richie back inside.

But Richie doesn't listen, just snakes his hand from Eddie's throbbing wrist up his arm, leaving goosebumps across his skin.

"Do you want me?" he asks, tilting his head back to look down at Eddie.

"What? No!"

"You're a liar. I see you haven't improved your poker face over the last 20 years." He drags his eyes over Eddie. "You were a slut for me, you know. No wonder I didn't feel anything when I fucked anyone else. Had this gorgeous boy hanging off my dick, begging me for it, for a whole year. How was anything else supposed to compare?"

Eddie pants at his words, digs his fingers into his thighs as Richie's

words burrow beneath his skin.

"Maybe that's why you never wanted anyone else," Richie continues, moving closer. "Maybe you got fucked by me so fucking good your body never wanted anything else. Maybe even when you forgot you still always knew my cock was the only one that got to be inside you, make you cum."

Richie takes Eddie's hand then and presses it to his crotch. Eddie makes a long, high whining noise in the back of his throat, his fingers spasming as they brush against the long, thick outline of Richie's dick where he strains against his jeans. Because he remembers how it feels: how it feels in his hand, hitting the back of his throat, pushing inside him bare, filling every empty space inside him until all he could feel and taste was Richie.

"Look what you do to me," Richie says hoarsely, staring down at Eddie's mouth. "Look what you do just by fucking existing. You have no idea what I'd do to you right now if I could. What I'd do to make sure you never fucking forget me again."

He looks at Richie with wide eyes, can't stop his mouth when he says, "What- what would you do?"

Richie leans in to answer, pushing Eddie's hand against his cock, when they hear a knock on the door.

It's Bill, and he's saving Eddie again.

*

But Bill can't always be there to save Eddie. Not from the clown, and not from himself. Later, they stand in the house on Neibolt, taking a breather before they go into the sewers. Eddie and Richie are holed up in one of the rooms at the back of the house. And Eddie wants so much to be alone, but Richie won't let him be, hovering near the door as Eddie tries not to have a complete meltdown.

"Stupid fucking Pomeranian, can you believe that shit?" Richie laughs, before spitting a mouthful of blood onto the floor.

"Richie, please leave me alone. I need to be by myself for a few

minutes."

Richie shakes his head, the immovable beast. "I'm not leaving you by yourself."

"I'm fine, okay?" he snaps. "I don't need a babysitter."

He thinks about the way he had frozen when they were being attacked. "God, I messed up. I'm such a fucking coward. I can't do anything right."

"Don't be stupid. You were scared. And ignore Bill, he's a fucking asshole."

But Eddie can't forget, can't not see himself freezing. Richie and the others could have died and he didn't do anything. What good was he to anyone if when his friends were in danger all he did was stand there like a fucking statue?

"Look, we don't have a lot of time but I need to talk to you before we go," he hears Richie say dimly in the background. "Mike talked about us being aligned or it wouldn't work. So I need you to know something."

And Eddie feels so tired, so utterly weighed down by Derry and everything that's happened over the last 27 years, he could just sink into the floor.

"I don't want to hear anything else, Richie."

"It's important."

"I don't care, okay? I just don't care."

"Yeah well, you're not leaving this room until you listen to me."

Eddie groans, turning to look at Richie. "God, what is fucking with you? Why do you think now is the time for any of this?"

"Because this is the only time we have left." And Richie looks so haggard as he stares at Eddie, so unlike the carefree boy Eddie had fallen in love with all those years ago. "Because there's a chance we

won't get out of this, and I can't go down there without you knowing."

"Richie, you've said enough. All you've done since we've come back is talk."

"I know, but not about the thing that really matters."

Eddie throws his hands up. "And what's that?"

"About why I left."

All the air in Eddie's lungs turns to ice. He feels that spot above his heart ache again, the one he's almost rubbed raw since yesterday. That's the last thing he wants to talk about. The thing he would happily hurl himself down into the sewers to avoid.

"I can't talk about that."

"We have to, baby. I'm telling you we have to."

"Don't call me that! You have no right to call me that." And Richie doesn't. Because how can Eddie be his baby when he so easily left?

"You're right, I don't. But that doesn't change the fact that we need to talk about it."

"I said *no*."

Richie grits his teeth, and plants himself in the doorway. "Stop fucking running away, Eddie."

Eddie throws his head back and laughs, but it sounds broken, like a music box you open to find the ballerina has been crushed.

"Me run away? That's fucking perfect coming from you. That's all you do, run away, right?"

"Eddie—"

And Eddie, on the edge of the sewers and what feels like his sanity, can't take it anymore.

"Fine, you want the truth? You want us to be aligned? You want to know what I remember about us? I remember you fucking leaving me!" And it's like a dam has broken, the one Richie has been picking at constantly since they got here. And he can't stop himself when he says, "You broke my heart, Richie. There you go, asshole. All laid out for you. Is that what you wanted? You made me love you and you fucked me and you fed me all these fucking lies about us running away together. And then you left. You left me in Derry to fucking starve. And you did it because you wanted to get out of here, because you're a goddamn selfish asshole!" He stops when he realises he's yelling. Feels his eyelashes wet with tears.

And suddenly all the years melt away. Eddie is 18 again and his heart is broken, and it's going to be broken for the rest of his life. Because Richie isn't answering the phone, and when Eddie goes to his house Richie's parents say they haven't seen him. And neither has his manager at work. And Eddie knows he's left him, even though just the week before, Richie had told him he'd love him forever. Even though he hadn't taken any clothes with him and hadn't taken his truck. Richie had left Eddie, and it hits Eddie like a car wreck that maybe Richie had never loved him at all.

Richie stares at him, for once in his life speechless.

"What was it?" And Eddie hates how thick his voice sounds. "You got tired of me? Found someone else? You'd been breaking me down since we were kids, and when you finally had me you got bored of me? I was just another fucking punchline to one of your jokes?"

"You don't get it at all."

"Then spell it out for me, dickwad, as I'm such a fucking idiot."

"I didn't grow tired of you," Richie yells. "I was obsessed with you. I loved you so fucking much I couldn't think straight. Always had been. Since the second we met, all I ever did was think about you. Think it broke my brain when we first kissed and you said you liked me back."

He pauses for a second, and the next thing he says makes Eddie stumble back.

"I was coming back for you, Eddie."

Eddie's stomach twists into knots. "Fuck you."

"Eddie-"

"You must think I'm such a fucking sap. Stop playing games with me."

"I'm not-"

"You think you can just lay all this shit on me? You want a reaction? Well suck on this. I was so heartbroken when you left, I tried to kill myself."

Richie sucks in a shocked breath. "What?"

"Yeah. I stopped eating, stopped going out. I wanted to fucking die, had to be hospitalised. Because I loved you so much, and I knew you weren't coming back. I knew it in my bones. And I- I hurt myself. I was okay in the end, and I got better with Mike who was still here. Why don't you ask him if you don't believe me? And I finally got out of Derry myself. But don't lie to me about coming back for me because it's not fucking fair."

"I'm not lying, Eddie."

"All you've wanted to do since you got here was mess with me. Just fuck off. If we get out of here alive, I never want to see you again."

But before he can leave, Richie has him up against the wall. And Eddie does want to punch him now, wants to claw his fucking eyes out and scream at him, but Richie takes his hands and pins them to the wall, doesn't even flinch from the way Eddie bares his teeth.

"I'm telling the truth," he says, his voice harsh like a growl. "I was coming back for you. You think I just got up one day and ditched you. Drove away and never fucking looked back, but I didn't. I-" and Richie chokes slightly, a shadow passing over his face. "I left because I wanted to surprise you. Remember we had all these dreams of running away and getting a house together? With a dog and a fucking fireplace? And you made this dream house scrapbook we'd flip through. You cut out all these pictures from these dumb housewife

magazines and stuck them in there."

Eddie doesn't want to think about it. Every memory of Richie nicks like a blade. But even as he wills it away, the memory blossoms inside him: how they would lie together on a mattress in the clubhouse, flicking through the book and giggling into each other's mouths.

"Well I found a place for us, Eddie. It was just in Bangor, nowhere fancy. And it fucking sucked. Like the paint was peeling and the stairs were falling apart. And I think you would have hated it, but it was going to be ours."

Eddie doesn't understand. A place? In Bangor? "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I was going to ask you to marry me."

Eddie feels his world shift on its axis.

"I lied last night when I said I didn't know what happened to the truck. I do." Richie shoves his hand into his pocket and brings it out, fist clenched. "I do know because I pawned her for this."

His hand opens, and in the centre of his palm lies a ring.

"It's my totem," Richie breathes. "That's the secret. The shame I've been carrying around. I was going to give this to you. We couldn't get married, I know that. But it was a symbol. Of how fucking devoted I was to you. Of how much you meant to me. When I got back I was going to ask you to meet me by the lake and then I was going to give you the ring and tell you everything."

Eddie stares at it. It's nothing special, a simple gold band in the middle of Richie's palm, but it makes his heart race all the same.

"Oh my god."

And the reality of it all hits Eddie. Of Richie plotting all summer, of buying the ring and giving up his beloved truck for it. Of hitch-hiking over to Bangor to see the house. Of getting the key. How excited he would have been to surprise Eddie.

"This is what Pennywise used against me," Richie continues, looking down at the ring. "He showed me this alternate reality, where we had left together and were happy. Almost led me onto the fucking railroad tracks today. He knew, you were all I ever wanted."

"Then why didn't you come back?" Eddie asks, eyes still frozen on the ring.

"Because I forgot, Eddie. I was only gone for a day and already I started to forget."

"What?"

Could that be true? Could they have forgotten that quickly?

"I fucked up. I had the house and the ring and everything. But I fucking forgot. We thought it took years for us to forget everything but it only took days. I'd only been there for an afternoon and I already started forgetting the colour of your eyes, how we first met, your last name. And then I woke up one day in this motel room and I had no idea why I was there. All I knew was that I'd left Derry and that I never wanted to go back."

Richie lifts his hand and cups Eddie's cheek. "I swear on my fucking life, baby, I was always going to come back to you."

But Eddie feels like his throat has closed up. He can't speak. All he can do is look at the ring in Richie's hands. Of a future they never had.

"I loved you," Richie whispers fiercely. "You were it for me. And when I saw you last night, it all came rushing back. All of it. But you were married, and I thought you had moved on from me. Moved on, while I spent my life feeling like half a person. Like I'd been fucking scooped out."

And hadn't Eddie felt like that too? Through the monotony of college and marriage and going to work every day. Like something inside him had already been snuffed out, that he was cruising through life not feeling anything?

"And there's something else I have to tell you. I'm in love with you,

Eddie."

Eddie blinks at him, feeling like he might faint. "What?"

"Yeah. And before you say anything, no, it's not because I loved you when we were kids. It's not some sense memory thing. I love you now. I love the way you are. I think if we'd never known each other and met for the first time, I'd still fall in love with you.

Richie strokes the corner of Eddie's mouth, voice impossibly gentle when he says, "I think I've always been waiting to fall in love with you again."

Fall in love. Is this how it feels? Is what the sharp ache inside him has been this entire time? The crush of seeing Richie again after all these years, the way he feels like he's been sinking in honey every time Richie looks at him?

"Richie-"

That's when Mike appears in the doorway behind them.

"It's time," he says. "We have to go."

*

Afterwards, Richie will say he saw Eddie die in the Deadlights. It's what what made him push Eddie out of the way just in time, shoving him to the side as the pole came hurtling toward him. Two inches to the right and they both would have been impaled. Instead the pole grazes their sides. Enough to cleave off a layer of skin, but not enough to kill them. After they kill Pennywise, the Losers manage to drag Richie and Eddie out of the cavern, falling out into the lake as the entrance to the sewers collapses behind them.

Eddie lands in a boneless heap on the side of the lake as the others whoop in the background, getting their arms around each other like they did when they were kids. Richie breaks away to stagger over to him, chest heaving as he falls down beside him.

"Eddie," he murmurs, stroking Eddie's face. "Eddie, baby, come back to me."

“Did we really do it?” Eddie asks him deliriously.

Richie smiles widely, all teeth and excess joy, and presses a hand to the wound on Eddie’s side. Blood pumps sluggishly through his fingers. Eddie hisses through his teeth at the pain and pressure, but doesn’t try to pull away.

“We really did it, Eds,” Richie says, the afternoon sun turning the tips of his hair golden. At some point he’d lost his glasses, and his eyes are so wide and blue that Eddie feels like he could drown in them.

“Am I dying?” Eddie asks. He feels drunk. Off living, off killing Pennywise, off being here with Richie. Can’t stop the filter between his brain and mouth when he says, “I’d be happy if I died here, like this, with you.”

Richie makes a choked noise, eyes clogging up with tears. One lands on Eddie’s mouth, gets lost between his lips. He tastes the salt on his tongue, closes his eyes briefly at the taste of Richie inside him.

“You’re not dying,” Richie says. “You’re alive. You’re alive and you’re beautiful and you’re mine.”

Richie leans down, his breath hot over Eddie’s mouth, but before he can do anything they’re being hauled up by the others, pulled tightly against them as they hug against the dying afternoon sun. Eddie lets himself be held, Richie’s arms tight around him, Bill pressed up behind him, Beverly running her hands through his hair. And for a moment the others are there. Not Stan. Not Georgie. But they can feel them. And Eddie lets himself cry. They all do. And the last thing he remembers before he passes out is Richie in his ear, a slow steady mantra of “you’re mine.”

Notes for the Chapter:

As I was writing this, I was thinking about my take on Richie and how it differs from the character you usually see in Reddick fics. I think it's important for me to say that I don't think Richie is necessarily a good person in this story. He's passionate about Eddie and utterly devoted to protecting him, but he's

not a nice man. He pushes Eddie into uncomfortable situations, touches him without his consent and makes him face memories when he's not ready for them. He's very flawed, and displays obsessive and cruel characteristics, but that was more interesting to me than writing a character who was wholly good.

I also don't think Eddie and Richie's relationship is a healthy one. They form an extremely intense and codependent bond at a very young age and they spend the next 20 years dealing with the fallout. I wanted to explore this kind of relationship and the impact it would have, but my intention isn't to glamorise it.

And while Richie and Eddie don't have sex in this fic until they're 17, it's heavily inferred that they were doing sexual things at a younger age. If the thought of that makes you uncomfortable, please don't read.

If you have any questions, come talk to me on Tumblr at [shortcake-kaspbrak](#).